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FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5258
INFO RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 6704
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 5593
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ PRIORITY 2145
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 0390
RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA PRIORITY 1320
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 3862
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0775
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 2227
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE PRIORITY 1024
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0331
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA PRIORITY 0825
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 001915

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/10/2031
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: VIOLENCE RETURNS TO MERIDA UNIVERSITY

REF: A. CARACAS 1627

[1](#)B. CARACAS 1713

Classified By: Mark Wells, A/Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (U) After weeks of relative calm following violent protests by rival student factions at the University of the Andes (ULA), there was another violent confrontation on June 21, including a shooting. One opposition student leader was shot, three others were briefly detained, and yet another remains underground. Pro-government students were responsible for the escalation in violence. The main protagonists remain students, but university officials are now being targeted as well. END SUMMARY

ALL OF NIXON'S MEN: PICKING OFF THE STUDENT LEADERS

[1](#)2. (C) Violent protests besieged the University of the Andes (ULA) in Merida state in May after federal courts suspended student elections; police intervention left dozens wounded on both sides (reftel a). Pro-Chavez elements renewed attacks on student opposition groups on June 21, when chavista students stormed the ULA campus brandishing firearms. Upon encountering members of the opposition Movimiento-13 (M-13), led by Nixon Moreno, the chavistas opened fire. Alfredo Contreras, an M-13 leader, suffered a gunshot wound in the leg. The shooter was arrested. The following day, Bolivarian Circles members stopped three M-13 members riding in a ULA-owned vehicle. Police arrived to search for weapons, allegedly found none, yet still took the three M-13 members into custody. One of the arrested was identified as Moreno aide Laurence Castro. The three detained were released late on June 22. As of this writing,

Moreno remains in hiding after police accused him last month of assaulting a police officer (reftel b).

UNIVERSITY OFFICIALS TARGETED, TOO

¶3. (U) On June 22, members of two pro-government groups, Utopia 78 and the Tupamaros, allegedly physically assaulted ULA dean Lestor Rodriguez Herrera. The dean was accompanying the three arrested students in an attempt to vouch that they were unarmed and not violating any laws. Another university official, Laura Toro, told the press she feared for her safety while on campus. Toro proposed a dialogue among Merida state officials and the various student political movements. She accused Utopia 78 of being supporters of pro-government student leader Geyson Guzman (see reftels).

COMMENT

¶4. (C) Student unrest at the ULA is somewhat more commonplace and violent than elsewhere in Venezuela. The latest aggression initiated with the police and chavista student groups, and targets outspoken student opposition leaders. Caracas student groups have peacefully assembled in the name of university autonomy; they have not at this point shown any propensity toward violence.

BROWNFIELD